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# Religious Experience and Spirituality

## *Biblical and Post-Modern*

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Michael R. Weed

We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to the meaning restores the experience . . .

T. S. Eliot

At the outset of these reflections, it is important to remind ourselves that both “religious experience” and “spirituality” designate difficult concepts. Not only is the phrase “religious experience” not a biblical one, but the very concept of “experience” is itself complex.<sup>1</sup> And we know that the expression “religious experience” can be used in different ways. For example, we occasionally hear such expressions used to describe a visit to Rheims Cathedral or attending a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. But we also know that there are other “religious experiences” wherein one becomes aware of a different order of reality, an experience of the numinous or transcendent. It is with this latter sense that we are concerned.

“Spirituality” is equally complex. For these reflections Robert C. Roberts’ definition will be adopted. That is, “spirituality” designates the manner in which different visions of “what human life is and ought to be” shape the self in correspondingly different ways.<sup>2</sup> Both religious and non-

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1986). Kasper reminds us that the concept of experience “is one of the most difficult and obscure concepts in all of philosophy” (81).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Robert C. Roberts, *The Strengths of a Christian* (Philadelphia:

religious interpretations of the meaning of reality and human existence offer basic concepts and evoke attitudes and dispositions which significantly shape the self. Used in this sense, one may speak of Hindu spirituality, Muslim spirituality, and even Marxist spirituality. To the extent that “religious experiences” become foundational to different visions of reality and of “what human life is and ought to be,” such religious experiences will evoke their own “spiritualities.”

Before proceeding, two observations are critical. First, as Robert Sokolowski observes, “there are no absolutely raw, uninterpreted, unarticulated givens in experience.”<sup>3</sup> All human experience is interpreted. Further, experiences cannot be fully or accurately interpreted simply on the basis of immediate sensations or feelings. Taking medicine, for example, may be an unpleasant experience but necessary to restore one’s health. On the other hand, inhaling tobacco smoke may be a pleasant experience but damages health. Food deprivation may feel good or bad and be either depending upon whether one is dieting or undergoing forced starvation. That is, every event or occurrence which becomes part of a “human experience” must be understood or interpreted within a broader context or horizon of meaning.

Second, it does not follow from the fact that experiences must be interpreted that subjective meanings are simply imposed on objective data. Nor is it the case that one may completely separate external or objective data from its subjective response or interpretation. Human “experience” is always a complex interplay of data and interpretation; experience can neither be

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Westminster, 1984) 17–18. Roberts’ definition has an advantage over definitions which limit “spirituality” to specifically supernatural views. But in that every total explanation of “reality,” including materialistic ones, organizes the self in terms of a confessional viewpoint, i.e., nonempirical, it is appropriate to speak of materialistic and secular “spiritualities.”

<sup>3</sup>Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) 134.

reduced to its subjective aspects nor restricted to its objective aspects. Rather, human experience has a dialectical structure wherein the self responds to the ongoing flow of events on the basis of previous interpretations formed in the interplay between the self and external reality.<sup>4</sup>

Still, it follows that perspective or outlook significantly shapes—even limits—one's experiences. Perspective predetermines both what one sees and overlooks; in effect, perspective largely predetermines what one "experiences." Thus, to say that an experience is "supernatural" one must not only have a perception of the "supernatural"; one must also have an interpretation of that which is designated "natural." Within such an outlook, an experience of the supernatural would appear to be exceptional—perhaps an intrusion into the natural.

By contrast, an alternative perspective might view all reality as dependent upon, reflective of, and inseparable from a deeper personal reality. For such a perspective, distinguishing between experiences of the "natural" and the "supernatural" might appear artificial and possibly misleading. At best, designations of the supernatural would identify those experiences that more directly reflect the deeper reality present in and through all events.

### Two Types of Religious Experience

These observations make possible the identification of two fundamental types of religious experience. The first is a general religious experience built into the structure of the human at the foundation of human consciousness; the second may both presume and illuminate the first.

General religious experience grows out of our involvement with life itself; it expresses itself in the form of a mysterious depth to reality met "in, with, and under" life's common experiences.<sup>5</sup> It emerges with our "experience

<sup>4</sup>Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 82.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York:

of our experience” and with the inescapable awareness of our own historicity. Finding ourselves existing in a fleeting “now” between a retreating past and an uncertain future, we encounter the mystery out of which we emerge and toward which we move. Or, experiencing both meaning and meaninglessness, we eventually are driven to question the meaning of reality as a whole; we desire a total answer.

Although this type of religious experience (growing out of our awareness of being inescapably bound to a reality which is ultimately mysterious) is given through reflection, it is not just an intellectual puzzle. It evokes awe and wonder, involving our total self—intellectual and affective—at its deepest levels. As such, this experience underlies and colors all our other experiences. It is, as Walter Kasper states,

an indirect, not a direct type of experience . . . It is therefore not just one experience alongside other experiences, but rather the basic experience present in our other experiences; it is an experience that presides over and gives a pervasive tone to all other experience.<sup>6</sup>

This “basic experience” of the unfathomable mystery of ultimate reality lies at the foundation of human consciousness and behind all human experience. Because human identity is inescapably bound to the mysterious origin and goal of reality, the question it raises may be repressed but not dismissed. It is not merely the question that humans ask; it is the question that humans are.<sup>7</sup>

The second form of religious experience consists of “disclosure situations” in which one experiences an epiphany of the mysterious depths of reality as personal and intentional. Such situations are not to be confused with occasions of what we have termed “general religious experience” in which one

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Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964 [1944]). Niebuhr can speak of a revelation “in the consciousness of every person that his life touches a reality beyond himself, a reality deeper and higher than the system of nature in which he stands” (127).

<sup>6</sup>Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 84–85.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Don Luigi Guissani, *The Religious Sense* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986) 63, 75.

becomes aware of, or reawakened to, the underlying question of human existence. That is, beyond the self's occasional awareness of the awesome and mysterious nature of existence, there are those rare experiences wherein one senses that the insurmountable chasm is being bridged—from the other side. Here, religious experience as “disclosure” is attached to particular objects or historical events. These occasions may become foundational for total interpretations which, in turn, guide subsequent interpretations of interactions with reality.

### **Biblical Spirituality: The Old Testament**

The biblical view of reality stands in sharp relief from those of the surrounding world. Similarly, the organization of the self in response to reality, “biblical spirituality,” also differs from that of the surrounding world. In the pagan world there were numerous accounts of encounters between humans and gods (theophanies). In these accounts, various supernatural powers, although existing at a different level than humans, still exist within the broader boundaries of the universe and may intrude into the world of human experience from time to time. Pagan theophanies thus provided fleeting contacts with powerful and unpredictable gods who moved on the horizon of human events.

Pagan spirituality was fundamentally shaped by the position of the self as vulnerable to the oblique interests of powerful supernatural beings who rewarded and punished humans according to their own mercurial amusements or annoyances. Certainly there was no sense that the gods desired or sought the best for the creation. In the first instance, the pagan gods were powerful; they were not good, much less faithful or just.

Thus the pagan lived with an underlying degree of anxiety not only regarding the flow of life's everyday events but also regarding whether the

powerful gods presently worshipped might be vanquished by some other god with equally ambivalent or malevolent intentions.<sup>8</sup>

In the biblical outlook, by contrast, there is no "other world" and there are no other gods. Yahweh alone is God. He is Creator of both heaven and earth. Thus, for Israel, God does not "break into the world" from time to time; he is never absent. On the other hand, God's presence is an "elusive presence"; he is never directly encountered.<sup>9</sup> In spite of visual features signifying God's presence, he is heard rather than seen.<sup>10</sup> And the word that is heard is the word of election and promise, commonly calling the hearer to carry out a particular task or mission (e.g., Abraham in Gen 12:1-2; Moses in Exod 3:7-8; Isaiah in Isa 6:1-13; Ezekiel in Ezekiel chap. 2).

Herein lies a crucial difference between biblical and pagan theophanies and their attendant spiritualities, namely, the disclosure that Yahweh alone is God and that his identity lies in his electing mercy and historic faithfulness to his covenant promises. Yahweh is fundamentally the God of promise, the God of history, and therein the God of the future. Human history is invested with direction and meaning, viz., the fulfillment of God's promises and the realization of his purposes. The revelation of God's promises and thus the revelation of God as the God-of-promise evokes a spirituality which orients its recipients toward the past, present, and future. The present is lived between memory of God's past faithfulness and hope in his future faithfulness: it is a present which stands in visible contradiction to the promised future, a present in which the unrealized fulfillment of promise

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1965).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

<sup>10</sup>Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 69, 110.

draws one confidently and expectantly "onward" (not "upward") through the everyday affairs of history into the future.<sup>11</sup>

### **Biblical Spirituality: Jesus and Paul**

Christian thought unfolds within the horizon of Old Testament promise and yet finds the center of that horizon in the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, the incarnate Son of God in whom the nature and purpose of God is fully revealed. Thus Jesus provides the center and point of departure for Christian identity. In the Gospel accounts of Jesus and the letters of the apostle Paul, we see the foundations and emerging shape of early Christian religious experience and spirituality.

While the Gospels portray Jesus as experiencing human emotions and possibly visions (Luke 10:18), little attention is given to Jesus' subjective state of mind. It would be accurate to say that the Gospels offer little insight regarding Jesus' own subjectivity or "experience." Further, the Gospel accounts of Jesus show him with no disdain for the world; he sought neither to avoid nor to escape life's daily activities.

Although Jesus instructs his disciples how to pray (e.g., Matt 6:5-13; Luke 11:1-4) and assumes the common practices of fasting and alms giving, he offers no instructions on meditation or how his disciples might have special experiences. Other than promising that in the future his disciples will see the "Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" at the parousia

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 118. Cf. James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961). Muilenburg points out that Israel does not seek to know God through escape from the mundane world. Even in its worship, perhaps especially in its worship, this is apparent. For Israel, "[w]orship is not a flight to 'the dim Unknown,' timelessness, or to 'a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts,' or to a shoreless ocean of quietude and unperturbed peace" (107-8).

Fortunately, Paul provides a vivid demonstration of the manner in which he views his own experience in light of the Christian message of the cross and resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 1:8f Paul records an experience of hardship and suffering, of being “under great pressure,” even to the extent that he “despaired of life.”

Through the “eyes of faith,” however, Paul is able to interpret the suffering and hardship accompanying his apostolic mission (and that of other Christians) as sharing in the sufferings of Christ in a manner enabling him both to receive and to offer comfort. Further, Paul can declare that the purpose of the events described in 2 Corinthians 1 was “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:8b, 9). Herein Paul’s subjectivity (his emotional experience, his despair) is subordinated to and reinterpreted in light of the objective reality of God’s resurrection of the one who suffered and was crucified.<sup>13</sup>

The biblical and early Christian orientation toward ultimate reality is more nearly temporal and social—even political—than spatial and individualistic. From the biblical perspective, one awaits not personal deliverance to a heavenly realm above, but the deliverance of the people of God in a coming final act which, inaugurated in Christ, is yet to be consummated in the future—an act with cosmic dimensions: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” As the Christian faith made its way in the Hellenistic world, however, this orientation would alter considerably and Christianity would emerge with a much more individualistic and otherworldly spirituality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>In Jesus and Paul we see a continuation and development of the Old Testament orientation toward the surrounding creation as the arena in which the Creator encounters his creatures and unfolds his redemptive purposes.

<sup>14</sup>In time, Christian spirituality has become largely identified with more otherworldly forms of spirituality and even mysticism. In this regard one cannot exaggerate the influence of the sixth-century Neo-Platonic writings

## Post-Modern Spiritualities: Attestation and Opportunity

The Enlightenment rationalism which, riding on the successes of science and technology, largely displaced traditional Christian interpretations of reality, is now itself being rejected as inadequate—shallow and sterile. We are now entering not only a Post-Christian age but also a Post-modern (Enlightenment) age.<sup>15</sup>

In this climate, new spiritualities are emerging.<sup>16</sup> These, however, are decidedly modern in that they embody modern views in which traditional understandings of reality have been discredited. But they are also unmistakably post-modern in that they sense and react to the failures of modernism. In particular, post-modern spiritualities display a loss of confidence in the abilities of science and technology to provide a humane environment for human flourishing.

Sociologist Peter Berger and others have observed the manner in which modern society produces widespread estrangement and alienation from social institutions. In Berger's apt phrase, the self is "homeless" among the impersonalism of technology and bureaucracy which dominate life in the modern world.<sup>17</sup> Under modernity's relentless pressure, even the traditional

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falsely attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned in Acts 17:34.

<sup>15</sup>Nearly sixty years ago Pitirim Sorokin foresaw this development in his predictions of an emerging "sensate society." For Sorokin, as societies reject the existence of and/or the importance of transcendent values—Truth and Goodness—attention inevitably shifts to that which is immediately available to the senses. Whereas pre-sensate societies seek truth and meaning and take pleasure in the quest, sensate societies abandon the pursuit of objective or public truth for subjective and private meanings. Eventually, in hypersensate societies, questions of truth are completely abandoned for the pursuit of pleasure. See Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age* (Oxford: One World, 1992 [1941]).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Paul Heelas, ed., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1974). A classic statement of this thesis is Max Weber's contention that Puritan this-worldly asceticism has given rise to economic conditions which dominate modern life as an "iron

haven from the outside world, the home, takes on the characteristics of society's impersonal institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, post-modern spiritualities tend to be highly individualistic and subjective. The self, having abandoned transcendent reality and alienated from the social world, turns within to find meaning and truth—or merely pleasure. The turn inward, however understandable, exacts a high price; for the self is left to construct its own “personally indexed meaning system” without reference to any transcendent reality. Post-modern meaning systems thus tend to be highly eclectic, and unstable. In describing modern religiosity as the product of individual tastes, Robert Wuthnow sees a kind of “synthesis of Christianity, popular psychology, *Readers' Digest*, folklore, and personal superstitions, all wrapped up in the anecdotes of the individual's biography.”<sup>19</sup>

Such visions of life, and their accompanying spiritualities, are “thin and insubstantial.” Significantly, the pursuit of pleasure, calibrated to individually indexed meaning systems, takes an enormous toll on the public sphere, which is no longer sustained by shared views of reality and commonly acknowledged commitments. As Robert Bellah (and co-authors) noted, the radically individualizing society generates “lifestyle enclaves” wherein one finds others who “reflect and affirm one's selfhood.”<sup>20</sup>

But post-modern views of reality not only threaten the broader social fabric. Post-modern approaches to reality realize the visions of Nietzsche by

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cage.” Cf. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958 [1904]) 181.

<sup>18</sup>Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind*, 187.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, & Secularism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989) 116. Thomas Luckmann discerned the development of private and subjective “universes of meaning” as early as 1967. See *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan) 77–106.

<sup>20</sup>Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 73–74.

threatening to destroy the unity of the self.<sup>21</sup> As the fundamental harmony of the self with its social and natural environments is weakened, the self's turn inward risks not only solipsism but the abandonment of the self to its sensations. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, the emerging post-modern self is a self which has experiences but is unable to understand and synthesize its experiences within any context of meaning. The "self" is reduced to being little more than meaningless dissociated sensations against the backdrop of a nihilistic abyss. It is only, as Eliot observes, "approach to the meaning" which "restores the experience."<sup>22</sup>

### A Formidable Challenge

Contemporary fascination with religion and spirituality offers a formidable challenge for Christianity. "New age" spiritualities in particular, in a manner similar to ancient Gnosticism, employ and distort Christian beliefs and practices within their own broader schemata. Such spiritualities are especially seductive to those finding themselves weary of secularization but too modernized to return to more traditional expressions of Christian faith.

This difficulty notwithstanding, contemporary spiritualities may be viewed as attesting to the strength of the religious impulse and as providing a challenge for Christian faith to commend itself. The contemporary fascination with "spirituality" and "things religious," however confused, may attest to the human heart's insuppressible desire for contact with the "beyond," with transcendence (what we have designated "general religious experience"). Further, the instability and confusion of contemporary spiritualities evidence that they are driven by truncated views of reality and of the self.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 462.

<sup>22</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1943) 39.

<sup>23</sup>Whatever the terminology or spiritual exercises employed, the contemporary "turn within" feeds upon the forces of alienation and

Nonetheless, contemporary interests in spirituality provide occasions for Christian faith to demonstrate that it addresses the deeper mysteries of life in a manner which fully encompasses the social, corporeal, and temporal aspects of human existence. The illumination of reality by the Second Adam calls and enables us to be more, not less, fully human than we are otherwise wont to be.

Our age is not poor in experience, but in faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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estrangement operative in modern society. The post-modern turn within presumes and does not alter the self's acute disorientation within the external world. Ultimately, the "turn within" abandons the self to strategies of contacting transcendence and meaning within its own subjectivity—a move that inevitably divinizes the self. Cf. Peter Berger, "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: 2,500 Years of Religious Ecstasy," in *Facing up to Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 195–206.

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